

Meet Your Chinese Zodiac Animal
中国生肖文化解读系列

The
YEAR
of the
DRAGON
生肖龙

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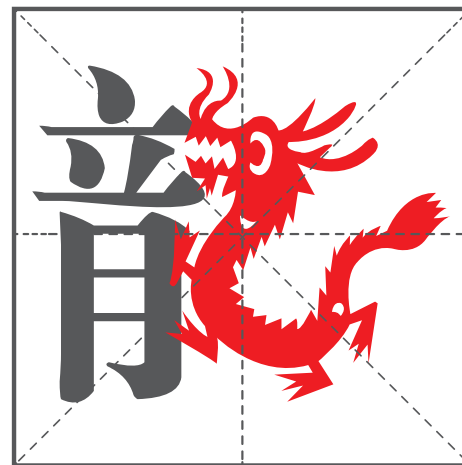
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Introduction



Dear friend, how much do you know about traditional Chinese culture?

Let's try a riddle to start: "There are 12 of them, each person claims but one of them; they can only be found in China. What are they?"

If you can figure it out, it shows that you know something about Chinese culture. In fact, former Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka put this riddle to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to China in September 1972 to enliven their meeting. The key to the riddle is "the 12-year cycle of animals in the Chinese zodiac", or simply "the 12 zodiac animals".



The riddle was a piece of cake for Premier Zhou, as the 12 zodiac animals are familiar to everyone in China. But what is the Chinese zodiac?

In Chinese, it is called 生肖 (shēngxiào). 生 means "be born", while 肖 means "resemble". In the eyes of the ancient Chinese, human beings are part of nature. People born in different lunar years correspond to specific animals. A person's character resembles that of his or her animal. The 12 animals are the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat,^① Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. People thus use them to number the years in a 12-year cycle.

^① The Chinese character 羊 (yáng) refers to both the goat and the sheep. Therefore, the eighth zodiac animal can be named goat or sheep. In this book, goat is used for the sake of convenience.

For example, if you were born in 2000, the Year of the Dragon, the dragon is your zodiac animal and is considered your lifelong mascot and guardian angel. Former Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was born in 1898, the Year of the Dog. Kakuei Tanaka, former Japanese Prime Minister, was born in 1918, the Year of the Horse. They met with each other in 1972, the Year of the Rat.

The Chinese people often mark the beginning of a year with the Spring Festival, which is the most important festival in the country. It corresponds with one of the 12 zodiac animals, which will in turn become the auspicious image of the festival. Most New Year pictures, couplets, and greetings will feature the zodiac animal.

“In the Year of the Rat, you will have good luck; in the Year of the Ox, you will grow stronger; in the Year of the Tiger, you will behave more bravely; in the Year of the Rabbit, you will become smarter; in the Year of the Dragon, you will have a promising career; in the Year of the Snake, you will be safe and sound; in the Year of the Horse, you will live a brilliant life; in the Year of the Goat, you will enjoy prosperity; in the Year of the Monkey, you will get a promotion; in the Year of the Rooster, you will win a prize;

in the Year of the Dog, you will flourish; in the Year of the Pig, you will become more prominent.” This is a Chinese New Year greeting related to the 12 zodiac animals used to wish everyone the best every year.

In China, there is a tradition associated with the Spring Festival that has been handed down for over a thousand years. When meeting with people during the festival, one should offer felicitations to others as often as possible. If instead you were to utter something ominous, it is said that this utterance will come true. In addition, Chinese people often use different felicitations in different years. If the year happens to be a year of a zodiac animal that has a noble status based on traditional Chinese culture, a good image, or a name that shares a similar pronunciation with words portending good fortune, Chinese people will use the zodiac animal name in their New Year greetings. These zodiac animals are the Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Horse, Goat, Monkey, and Rooster. As for the other zodiac animals, which are the Rat, Snake, Dog and Pig, they do not appear in New Year greetings. The dragon is a zodiac animal revered by the Chinese as it symbolizes divinity, authority, and invincibility based on traditional Chinese culture. Naturally, when the Chinese usher in the Spring Festival in the Year of the Dragon,

in determining a marriage. This resulted in a great number of tragic marriages during the long period of feudalism in China. However, young people today no longer cling to the match of zodiac animals when they choose their boyfriends or girlfriends. At any rate, this remains an indispensable topic for chitchat among Chinese people.

🐉 Eminent Figures Born in the Year of the Dragon

According to the Chinese zodiac, many outstanding figures in Chinese history were born in the Year of the Dragon. Here are a few of them:



Xun Kuang

Born in 313 BC, representative of Confucianism and philosopher of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 25). He is also known as Xunzi.



Sima Qian

Born in 145 BC, a historian in ancient China and author of the historical masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian*.



Ban Chao

Born in 32, famous military strategist, diplomat of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) and a pioneer of the Silk Road.



Zhu Yuanzhang

Born in 1328, founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).



Cai Yuanpei

Born in 1868, former president of Peking University and one of the major torchbearers of the May 4th Movement.^①



Guo Moruo

Born in 1892, eminent modern writer, poet, historian, archaeologist, and expert in paleography.

① An anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement growing out of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, the May 4th Movement protested against the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially allowing Japan to receive territories in Shandong which had been surrendered by Germany. These demonstrations sparked national protests by students, industrial workers and businessmen, and marked the upsurge of Chinese nationalism.